Chapter 2
Policy-Relevant Education Research: A Study of Access, Quality and Equity in Bangladesh

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Abstract The chapter examines the process and findings of a multinational policy-relevant research project undertaken in Bangladesh and the extent to which it influenced policy and strategy discourse in respect of the national goal of achieving quality and equity in Universal Primary Education. The project was the Bangladesh part of the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) carried out during 2005–2011, supported by the Department for International Development (DFID) and involving institutions from Bangladesh, India, Ghana, South Africa and the UK. The research focused on the exploration of the status, characteristics, conditions, impediments and promotive factors related to the access of children to basic education at primary and lower secondary levels. The project comprised of the preparation of a common research plan and design, review of relevant data and documentation, sample survey and primary data collection from schools and households, analysis of two rounds of data, drawing inferences and conclusions, preparation of research reports and policy briefs, and national and international dissemination. This chapter first introduces the purpose, analytical framework and research design of the project as well as the main findings of the Bangladesh part of the research and goes on to critically comment on its dissemination process and policy-related outcomes. The extent to which and how the policy discourse on access, equity and quality in primary education in Bangladesh has been influenced by CREATE's research results are also critically examined.

Keywords Policy-relevant research · Basic education · Primary education · Access · Equity · Education policy

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Introduction

Although Universal Primary Education (UPE) was largely achieved in the developed world by the early twentieth century, it has remained a cherished and elusive goal in the developing world. This goal was collectively articulated more than a half-century ago in the series of UNESCO conferences in Karachi, Addis Ababa and Beirut in 1960–1961, setting a target date of 1980 to realise it (UNESCO, n.d.). When it became obvious that the UPE target would not be reached, the Education for All (EFA) movement was launched at the World Conference on Education for All in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, urging all countries and the international community to commit themselves to meeting basic learning needs for all. In 2000, the Dakar Framework for Action, adopted in World Education Forum, was more specific about promoting Universal Primary Education, eliminating gender disparity in education and reducing adult illiteracy by half in each country by 2015. At the same time, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the United Nations (UN) also endorsed the Universal Primary Education and literacy targets for 2015.

Once again, although remarkable progress was made, it is obvious by now that the developing world has fallen significantly short of the 2015 EFA targets and MDGs. The national and international discourse on the post-2015 development agenda and the place of education in it have brought to the fore the pertinence of policy-relevant research and how it can inform the dialogue about assessing educational progress and setting policies and priorities in education at national and global levels. Within this context, it is worthwhile to look at the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) research project, which focused on educational access and equity, aiming to bring out policy and strategy lessons. The Bangladesh part of the CREATE research results, as will be seen below, has influenced policy discourse in the run-up to 2015 and the thinking for the post-2015 era.

Background: Developing a Research Agenda

The CREATE was established with support from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) in 2006 as a partnership between research institutions in the UK, Bangladesh, India, Ghana and South Africa. Researching improved access in the context of EFA, and the MDGs clearly had many dimensions. CREATE aimed selectively to address six critical areas: (a) current patterns of access and exclusion in basic education, (b) strategies likely to be most effective in meeting basic educational needs, (c) options available to improve student progression in and completion of primary education, (d) addressing dropout and encouraging re-entry, (e) improving transition from primary to secondary level and (f) political, social and economic conditions under which the EFA goals can be

achieved (Lewin, 2007). These areas were explored empirically in Bangladesh, Ghana, India and South Africa with research teams based in local institutions.

In the first phase, CREATE commissioned analytic reviews at the country level into the status of access to provide baseline data and review key issues and problems located in each national system. These analyses were developed in parallel with a series of thematic reviews and studies which attempted to develop state-of-the art insights into different research questions relevant to access. These included studies of access in relation to health and nutritional status, non-government providers, school processes and school governance, patterns of enrolment growth in sub-Saharan Africa and other selected countries, concepts in policy studies, inclusive education, EFA long-term planning and financing the expansion of secondary education. Both country-level reviews and thematic research reviews resulted in a series of CREATE Discussion Papers.

Through this collection, which includes basic baseline information and its analysis, it was expected that the conceptual frameworks to understand educational access in new ways would be developed, and these could be shared with decision-makers and key stakeholders in each country. It was also expected that new knowledge of the factors that had shaped access and their significance could be analysed and linked to policy and practice at the community level and above. This analysis, therefore, could help the evaluation of the current status, the extent of implementation, and the effectiveness of local, national and international strategies to improve access. As a result, feasible policy options backed by evidence could be identified for progress towards the MDGs and the EFA.

The research activities framework that was constructed to guide the country-level and comparative analysis is shown in Figs. 2.1 and 2.2.

An important conceptual construct for the analytical framework for CREATE research was the zones of exclusion. This concept attempts to focus attention on the exclusion of children from educational participation, the forms of exclusion and how exclusion can be addressed. Seven zones of exclusion were identified, as shown below, of which four—zones 1–4—were used more extensively in the country-level analysis which is reported in this study.

It is generally the case that those who are not enrolled and who will never enrol (Zone 1) are the minority of those out of school; however, they still constitute significant numbers, especially in conflict-prone and unstable situations, and are difficult to reach. By far the largest numbers of school-age children who are out of school were enrolled at some time but had failed to persist (Zones 2 and 4). Children in Zone 3 and Zone 6 are those judged to be at risk of dropping out. The way of identifying such children is generally through patterns of attendance and of low achievement. Low achievement leading to slow progression, failure in promotion tests and repetition is clearly exclusionary. This 'silent exclusion' of children attending but learning little is a useful concept which can only be judged in context on the basis of the analysis of relevant data (Lewin, 2007). Lewin noted that a large proportion of children in developing countries fall into this category; however, they seem to be given relatively little attention in research and policy discussion.
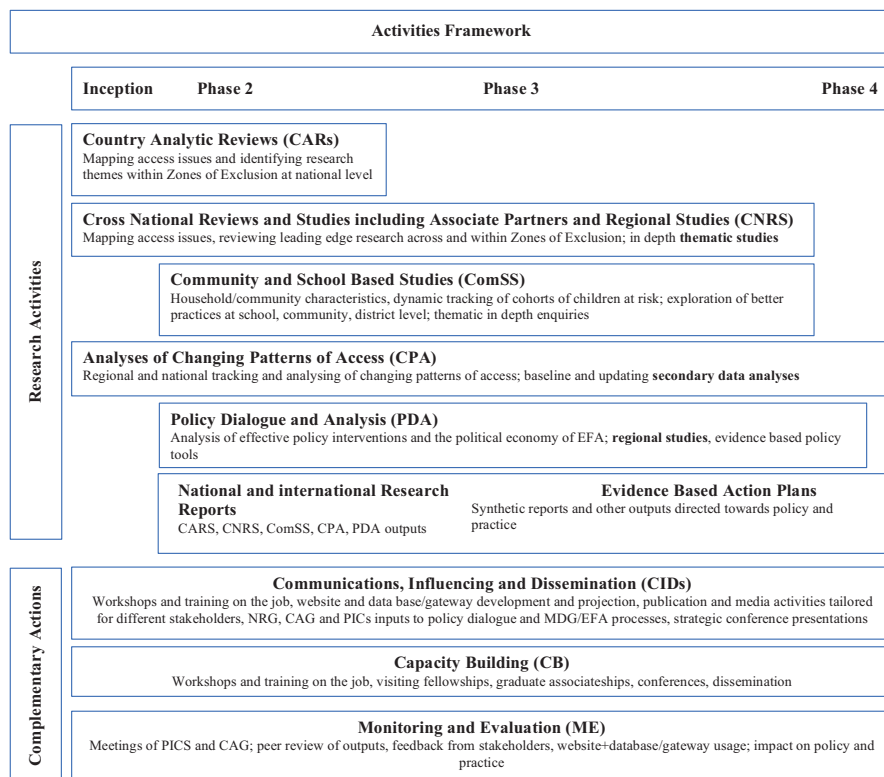
Activities Framework

Inception	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4

Research Activities

Country Analytic Reviews (CARs)
Mapping access issues and identifying research themes within Zones of Exclusion at national level

Cross National Reviews and Studies including Associate Partners and Regional Studies (CNRS)
Mapping access issues, reviewing leading edge research across and within Zones of Exclusion; in depth **thematic studies**

Community and School Based Studies (ComSS)
Household/community characteristics, dynamic tracking of cohorts of children at risk; exploration of better practices at school, community, district level; thematic in depth enquiries

Analyses of Changing Patterns of Access (CPA)
Regional and national tracking and analysing of changing patterns of access; baseline and updating **secondary data analyses**

Policy Dialogue and Analysis (PDA)
Analysis of effective policy interventions and the political economy of EFA; **regional studies**, evidence based policy tools

National and international Research Reports
CARS, CNRS, ComSS, CPA, PDA outputs

Evidence Based Action Plans
Synthetic reports and other outputs directed towards policy and practice

Complementary Actions

Communications, Influencing and Dissemination (CIDs)
Workshops and training on the job, website and data base/gateway development and projection, publication and media activities tailored for different stakeholders, NRG, CAG and PICs inputs to policy dialogue and MDG/EFA processes, strategic conference presentations

Capacity Building (CB)
Workshops and training on the job, visiting fellowships, graduate associateships, conferences, dissemination

Monitoring and Evaluation (ME)
Meetings of PICS and CAG; peer review of outputs, feedback from stakeholders, website+database/gateway usage; impact on policy and practice

Fig. 2.1 CREATE research activities framework (Lewin, 2007, p. 31)

Zone 0 – children who are excluded from pre-schooling

Zone 1 – children who have never been to school and are unlikely to attend school

Zone 2 – children who enter primary schooling, but who drop out before completing the primary cycle

Zone 3 – children who enter primary schooling and are enrolled but are "at risk" of dropping out before completion as a result of irregular attendance, low achievement, and silent exclusion from worthwhile learning

Zone 4 – children who fail to make the transition to secondary school grades

Zone 5 – children who enter secondary schooling but who drop out before completing the cycle

Zone 6 – children who enter secondary schooling and are enrolled but are "at risk" of dropping out before completion as a result of irregular attendance, low achievement and silent exclusion from worthwhile learning

Fig. 2.2 CREATE zones of exclusion (Lewin, 2007, p. 24)

Bangladesh Participation in CREATE

This section explains Bangladesh's involvement in the international research project and how it benefited from the research framework and design and contributed to achieving the overall objectives of the project.

The Institute of Educational Development at BRAC University (BRACU-IED), as the partner institution in Bangladesh, joined the CREATE Research Project Consortium (RPC) because BRACU-IED's mission closely resembled the overall objective of CREATE. BRACU-IED is committed to promoting the application of knowledge and insights from research to improve policy and practice on more equitable access to basic education and contribute to the achievement of the EFA goals and the MDGs. The BRACU-IED team undertook three major tasks in Bangladesh, namely, conducting (a) a country review and analysis of the situation as it existed regarding access and participation in basic education, (b) empirical studies at community and school levels and (c) further analyses of access issues based on the country analytical reviews, the community and schools research and the secondary data sets, which led to a series of monographs and policy briefs on critical issues. The following section provides an overview of research activities undertaken in Bangladesh as part of the CREATE project.

This writer led the Bangladesh part of the CREATE project on behalf of BRACU-IED. He was also a member of the management group of the project headed by Keith Lewin of University of Sussex and comprised of the representatives of the institutions from Bangladesh, Ghana, India, South Africa and the UK which were partners in the project. As a member of the managing group, the writer participated in conceptualising and designing the project, reviewing its progress, commenting on draft materials and contributing to various project outcome documents. This participation required periodic face-to-face meetings of the group as well as on-line communication.

CREATE Research Activities

Over the lifetime of the CREATE project in Bangladesh, 2006–2011, various outputs resulted from the research activities. These included a Country Analytic Review (CAR), Community and School Studies (ComSS), Pathways to Access series (PTAs) monographs, journal articles and other research products including conference presentations, workshops and dissemination events.

Country Analytic Review (CAR)

The CAR was an inception phase activity of CREATE. The Bangladesh CAR attempted to gather baseline information, using secondary sources, on access, equity and participation in education and analyse this information for further research. The secondary sources included published and unpublished research reports, government documents, databases and information from education authorities.

The research team, headed by the coordinator of CREATE in the Bangladesh partner institution, consisted of people who had been involved in research and analysis of aspects of access issues in Bangladesh. The team identified the key components of the report and formulated a structure for it, based on the CREATE generic guideline for CAR. The design and components of the study and the process followed reflected the objective of promoting policy discourse and influencing policy in respect of the national goal of achieving quality and equity in Universal Primary Education (Ahmed, Ahmed, Khan, & Ahmed, 2007).

Community and School Studies (ComSS)

The purpose of the ComSS, a longitudinal research carried out through two rounds of surveys in 2007 and 2009, was to explore how meaningful access to basic education for boys and girls between the ages of 4 and 15 years could be ensured in the context of individual communities. Focussing on selected communities, ComSS examined the pattern of access and exclusion at different stages and identified the reasons for different types of exclusion. In addition, it explored options for improving progression and completion and considered ways to facilitate re-entry into the school system for dropout children.

ComSS focused on six rural areas, one in each division of Bangladesh. Across these 6 areas, surveys were administered to 36 schools and to 6695 households containing 9047 children aged 4–15 years. Further, separate surveys were administered to identify dropout and never-enrolled children and a child tracking survey aimed to act as a bridge between the child data from the household survey and information about schools gathered in the school survey. Literacy tests were administered to parents of enrolled, never-enrolled and dropout children, and to dropout children themselves.

Eight research instruments were developed and used for collecting data in 2007 and 2009: a household survey; a school survey; a child tracking card; interview schedules for head teachers, assistant teachers, never-enrolled children and dropout children; and a literacy test for the parents of enrolled, never-enrolled and dropout children, and for the dropout children themselves. Based on the data collected, two ComSS reports were prepared, and the findings were shared in the CREATE partners' meeting in Sussex, the UK.

Pathways to Access Series (PTAs) Monographs

Seven PTAs monographs were prepared on different aspects of access and exclusion in Bangladesh. The aspects addressed in the monographs included the sector-wide approach, poverty and equity, dropout children, grade congruence and progression, slums children, diversity and financing in basic education. The PTAs provided the main content for a book on overcoming hurdles to access with equity and quality in basic education in Bangladesh, rushed into publication with the cooperation of BRAC University Press, to have it ready for launch in a high-profile national education conference in May 2011 on implementation of the new national education policy (Ahmed, 2011a).

Policy Briefs

Based on CARs, ComSS and PTAs, seven policy briefs were prepared. These policy briefs were prepared in such a manner that policymakers would be able to understand the key policy-relevant message while paying short attention and time.

Key Research Findings

As stated above, the main research questions are centred around understanding the patterns of access, participation and exclusion in basic education and exploring effective strategies for achieving Universal Primary Education. This understanding, it was envisaged, could be shared with decision-makers and key stakeholders in each country. It was also hoped that the new knowledge of the factors that had shaped access and their significance would be analysed and linked to policy and practice at the community level and above (see Fig. 2.1 CREATE activities). The major findings and conclusions emerging from CREATE research in Bangladesh became the grist for the mill in policy discussion, conferences, seminars and informal dialogues on education policy concerns and issues, planning of external educational assistance and assessment of educational progress. The highlights of policy relevant findings are described below.

Having made remarkable progress in terms of initial enrolment in primary education as well as gender equality, Bangladesh still faces enormous challenges in ensuring completion of primary education and acceptable learning achievement. Empirical studies have suggested that Bangladesh, along with other large-population South Asian countries, will fall significantly short of reaching the 2015 goal of Universal Primary Education interpreted as completion of the full cycle of primary education by virtually all in the eligible age group (Ahmed & Govinda, 2010). The key points regarding progress towards access with equity and quality are recapitulated below.

It is evident that the large majority of children in Bangladesh do enrol in some form of education. Progress has been made in enrolment in primary education for both girls and boys; however, there have been small improvements in completion of the 5-year primary cycle and only limited progress in meeting learning outcomes—two main indicators of the efficiency and effectiveness of the system.

Children attend a variety of school types in Bangladesh (e.g. government schools, NGO schools, madrasahs, etc.). These vary in terms of teacher education, building and facilities and teacher-pupil ratios. Overall, the performance of all types of schools (with the exception of NGO run non-formal primary education) has been problematic and less than acceptable in terms of meaningful participation and available evidence about learning outcomes. Fieldwork data suggest that madrasahs in particular, at both primary and secondary levels, are less well-endowed in terms of physical facilities and teachers, and student attendance, continuation and completion rates are lower than those of other education providers.

The Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP II) of Bangladesh for the period 2005–2011 set targets for the efficiency of the system (dropout and completion rates) that were modest. Even if the targets were reached during the extended period of PEDP II implementation up to 2011, the completion rate of primary education by children in primary age group would rise only to 55%. There would still be much more to be done to achieve an acceptable standard.

There was some progress in the number of competencies achieved by Grade 5 students in all types of institutions. On average, two-thirds of the basic competencies were achieved, while one-third were not achieved, although the tests were designed with the assumption that a student completing primary education would pass in all competencies. In relation to this, the Education Watch findings were consistent with the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) assessment (Ahmed & Choudhury, 2015).

In respect of learning outcome, the key quality criteria, the PEDP II targets for basic competencies in literacy and numeracy, were far from ambitious. Even if the targets were reached, a quarter of primary education completers would still be without acceptable literacy skills and one-third of the students without essential numeracy skills (Directorate of Primary Education [DPE], 2009).

The high student-teacher ratio and low contact hours were major factors in poor student performance. These deficits can be explained by the low overall public sector allocation for education and low allocation for primary education, which remained less than 1% of GDP, one of the lowest in the world (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2015). The PEDP II target again projected only a modest increase.

The ComSS study confirmed that non-enrolment of school-age children (exclusion zone 1) remains a significant problem. While official national statistics indicate a non-enrolment rate of around 10%, it was difficult to establish this proportion definitively for a particular time in specific communities, which itself was indicative of the complexities in applying remedial strategies.

The ComSS confirmed a high level of dropout (exclusion zone 2) as a critical problem both at primary and secondary levels caused by a nexus of poverty, reflected in the food-security status of families, parental education and how education is

delivered (school-related factors). By implication, there was a lack of capacity in families to support and guide their children through schooling—a lack that schools were failing to compensate or remedy. Clearly the schools need to do more to grapple with this problem.

The dropout problem was compounded by a phenomenon revealed by ComSS—that young children were participating in rural-urban migration as a livelihood strategy for families, which appears to be a contributing factor to about half of the apparent dropout in primary and secondary levels. The suggestion of the pattern of child migration of the indicated scale had important implications for policy and strategy regarding access, continuation in school, completion of the primary stage and finally transition into the secondary.

The category of silent exclusion or zone 3 was an important conceptual construct that focused attention on the large proportions of children who were enrolled in school, but not effectively engaged in learning. The characteristics of these students included poor attendance, grade repetition and poor performance in class activities and examinations, all of which made them vulnerable to dropping out. It was however difficult to quantify this situation with precision. ComSS indicated that this category, at a minimum, comprised a fifth to a quarter of all primary students.

The ComSS 2009 survey indicates that about a quarter of the children who completed Grade 5 did not enrol in Grade 6—the 1st year of secondary education. This number, however, underestimated the zone 4 problem. The peaking of dropout from Grade 5 (a quarter of total dropout) also implies a high level of nontransition to secondary schools (a zone 4 issue). Data from ComSS 2007 to 2009 suggested that a proportion of children were leaving government institutions, indicating a preference for NGO schools and even private kindergartens. Education Watch recorded a general overall shift in enrolment from government to other schools between 1998 and 2008 (Nath & Chowdhury, 2009). This situation complicates the task of recording and analysing access and participation. It also raises questions about the effectiveness and the *perception* of effectiveness by parents of different types of institutions and points to the importance of coordinated and comprehensive planning and oversight mechanisms for the multiple providers of education at the local (sub-district) level.

ComSS revealed that about 60% of the non-enrolled children were from the 6 to 8 years age group. The culture of enrolling children in school consistently at age 6 had not caught on. The absence of birth registration and birth records also supported a casual approach to age for starting school. The consequences of late enrolment were manifested in dropout in later years, and high opportunity costs for school attendance as children were seen as ready for being engaged in paid or unpaid work. For girls, there was also increased concern among parents about the safety and security of older girls walking to school and family and community pressure to marry them off.

ComSS revealed clear relationships between non-enrolment, dropout, nontransition and socio-economic variables, represented by the food-security status of families, household income and parent's education, as might be expected. Two-thirds of the never-enrolled children were from families with 'always in deficit' (ultra-poor) and 'sometimes in deficit' (poor) status in respect of staple grain supply for the fam-

ily. In the case of dropouts, 55% of the children came from households with food deficit, although 45% of the population were in this category.

A large proportion of school-age children suffered from health problems (about a quarter of children of the school age, in and out of schools, sampled had been sick in the previous 30 days). When ill health or episodes of sickness combined with other disadvantages of children prone to be in exclusion zones, their chances of effective participation in education were further diminished. Their quality of educational experience ultimately suffers, as children with health problems often enrol in school late and have high rates of absenteeism, lower cognitive development and an increased risk of dropping out.

Household perceptions of reasons for non-enrolment and dropout suggested supply-side constraints: schools are located too far from homes, and school education is perceived as of little value to children. Stipends to poor students (conditional cash transfer) in primary school remains a government strategy to promote equity in educational access. The supply-side constraints perceived by parents suggest that the funds spent for stipends could be better used in providing essential quality-enhancing inputs in schools. This question needs to be examined rigorously, especially because of the major budget implications of choices made (Hossain & Zeitlyn, 2010).

Key Policy Messages

A long list of problems and concerns emerged from CREATE research and analysis, as indicated above. Obviously, each of these could not be addressed in isolation, especially as they were interconnected in various ways. They needed to be tackled in a coordinated manner with policy interventions and strategic actions that not just recognised but highlighted the connectedness among the specific concerns. The policy messages and areas for action or further research, as discussed below, were based on this premise.

Birth Registration

The absence of birth registration was a source of confusing and conflicting statistics regarding the enrolment, completion and dropout data necessary for proper planning and management of the system. It was considered by CREATE that measures should be taken through local government agencies to enforce registration of new births required by health and local government regulations, but not enforced rigorously. Retroactive birth registration of 5–6-year-olds should be undertaken as part of the government plan to bring all 6-year-old children into school by the school year 2011. A campaign of awareness-raising and registration drives should be launched at the local and national levels jointly by education, health, local government, NGOs and civil society organisations.

Child Migration

The phenomenon of child migration—children leaving their family either to work or to be closer to a school—was identified as an important dimension of school dropout, needing further research to understand the reasons for migration and the activities of migrants as well as investigation of the scale of the phenomenon. There was a very limited amount of research on the implications for access and participation in the basic education of children arising from the phenomenon of rural-urban migration in Bangladesh. Further qualitative research could trace these children and find out more about their migration and activities.

Development and Trial of Sub-district-Based Universal Primary Education Planning and Management

CREATE recommended that a rigorous trial should be designed involving local government and all service providers in selected sub-districts as a key feature of government educational development strategy in order to rationalise provisions for quality basic education for all children with greater authority and accountability of schools and local bodies. School- and community-based actions to support the poor and the silently excluded and to overcome misperceptions and resistance towards the role of non-governmental and community organisations in education should be a part of the development and trial.

Assessment of Learning Achievement and Unintended Consequences

The peaking of dropout in Grade 5 and the lowering effects on completion of primary education and the newly introduced public examinations needed serious attention. Remedial strategies in teaching-learning, formative assessment throughout the school duration and making the public examinations a genuine assessment of basic competencies taught in school rather than tests of textbook contents should be systematically pursued. In the absence of a systematically applied method of assessing learning achievement at the primary level, the introduction of the end of primary examination was a positive move. However, work had to continue on issues regarding the 'backwash' effects on student participation and effects on classroom practices and making it a genuine and valid assessment of essential competencies prescribed in the curriculum.

Silent Exclusion

Silent exclusion—the phenomenon of children physically present in the classroom but not engaged in learning and thus intellectually absent—was clearly a serious problem affecting a large proportion of children. It involved around a quarter of the students in primary schools identified in this study. This however needs to be probed further into in order to analyse the different types and reasons for silent exclusion. Given the difficulties in identifying the silently excluded, research could focus on ways of identification and quantification of this phenomenon. Longer term qualitative and ethnographic research in classrooms would reveal much more about the nature and prevalence of silent exclusion. Responses to address this situation would entail specific attention to this phenomenon in school and community-based actions indicated under recommendations for sub-district-based planning and management above.

Responding to Family Poverty

Clear relationships were found between non-enrolment and socio-economic variables, represented by the food-security status of families, household income and parents' education, as might be expected. Household perceptions of the reasons for non-enrolment suggested supply-side constraints: schools located too far from home, and school education perceived by families as of little value to children.

Stipends to poor students (conditional cash transfer) in primary school were a government-funded activity linked to PEDP II and remain a government strategy to promote equity in educational access. The supply-side constraints perceived by parents (also indicated in various Education Watch reports) suggest that the funds spent for stipends could be better used in providing essential quality-enhancing inputs in schools, including school meals. This question needs to be examined rigorously, especially because research (Hossain & Zeitlyn, 2010) has pointed out major implications of such choices on the budget.

Urban Poor Children

While the urban people in general were better off than their rural counterparts in respect of educational services, the rapidly growing poor slum dwellers were underserved by both governments and NGOs (see also Banu, Roy, & Shafiq, Chap. 6, this volume). There was a subset of households who comprised of extremely poor families (roughly, the poorest quintile) and for whom even low private education costs were prohibitive. Expanding services for the urban poor, including subsidies and other support, would be essential to maintain high primary enrolments and to reach the UPE goal (Cameron, 2010).

Common Quality Standards

The critical policy challenge in primary and secondary education was to set and enforce common quality standards for all types of schools and ensure acceptable learning outcomes from them, recognising the role and contribution of diverse provisions for educational delivery. The relative strengths of each type of education provider and its potential for contributing to improved outcomes by children in specific circumstances needed to be identified and assessed and best use made of their strengths and potentials (Sabur & Ahmed, 2010).

Making Multiple Provisions: A Source of Strength

Different types of schools (government-managed schools, government-assisted and government-controlled schools, government-assisted madrasahs, NGO-run complementary or alternative institutions and private sector institutions) served learners in different circumstances and conditions and, therefore, were not fully substitutable with each other. Sabur and Ahmed (2010) noted that quality constraints in each category had to be assessed and solutions found. At the same time, a coordinated approach to providing services through multiple provisions and the willingness of schools to learn and adapt would help improve the performance of the system overall.

Greater Authority and Responsibility at School Level

Along with area-based coordination and planning, it was important to move towards greater authority and responsibility at the institutional level for organising teaching-learning, managing personnel, giving due attention to under-performing children and their specific difficult circumstances and using financial resources with accountability to parents and community.

Harnessing NGO Contributions

NGOs, given their record in providing complementary and alternative educational opportunities, should be supported to target educationally disadvantaged areas and groups (Sabur & Ahmed, 2010) and to design and offer inclusive and responsive approaches to underserved populations within the framework of area-based and area-coordinated programmes.

A Major Increase in Public Resources

Substantially greater public resources should be committed within the framework of the sixth 5-year plan and the new education policy in order to assure minimum necessary levels of quality with equity. Equally important is the effective use of resources—for example, sub-district-based capitation formulas, decentralised management of resources and assessing optimal use of scarce resources, a case in point being the spending on stipends. More resources were needed at the school level along with greater discretion with accountability in their use. The question of affordability must be turned around to ask—could we afford not to make the necessary investment in education with quality and equity?

A Pragmatic and Flexible Programme Approach

In designing the new modality of programme management and cooperation with donors, a pragmatic programme approach for primary education development needs to be adopted. It should be based on the principle of a comprehensive programme that includes all forms and modes of primary education, including second chance or non-formal provisions, and all children including those with various special needs, going beyond the domain of DPE. The structure of the programme and its components, and the implementation mechanism, would need to be appropriately flexible (Ahmed, 2011b).

In summing up the highlights of findings described above, it can be said that CREATE research activities and outputs have contributed significantly to the articulation of policy objectives and priorities including the formulation of the new education policy. The overarching challenge is now to move effectively towards realising the objectives and applying the related strategies. The analysis, findings and conclusions from CREATE research also have indicated the strategies and priorities in actions to be followed in fulfilling the key policy objectives.

CREATE Contribution in Policy Discourse

It was clear by 2011 that Bangladesh would come close to achieving universal initial enrolment in primary education by 2015 and, however, would fall short considerably of universal completion of primary education, thus failing to achieve the MDG and EFA primary education goals. Current trends also indicated that there would be a major deficiency in the achievement of essential skills and competencies by primary education completers, an essential element of effective participation and meaningful access in primary education. Both noncompletion of primary education and poor learning achievement were intimately linked with equity in participation.

The critical questions then in Bangladesh, as the PEDP II was winding down by mid-2011, were (a) how the next phase of primary education development in the country up to 2015 and beyond would be shaped, (b) how the government was positioned to design and implement a relatively comprehensive subsector programme, (c) how development partners could support the national effort and (d) what lessons had been learned in these regards. The CREATE country analytic review, studies of communities and schools in six locations, conducted over a 3-year period, provided insights to address these critical questions and explore the dynamics of participation and exclusion of children in schooling.

The analytical framework of 'zones of exclusion' was found highly relevant in formulating research issues, designing tools for research, analysing the data and framing conclusions and recommendations. Drawing on this research, progress and constraints in achieving UPE were examined. The research provided insights into policy priorities and strategic actions for overcoming the hurdles to UPE with equity and quality. These priorities for policy and action were seen in relation to the urgent task of designing the next phase of primary education development, debating issues in external development assistance for this purpose and placing the new UPE programme within the framework of political commitments reflected in the recent Education Policy 2010 and the 5-year national development plan under preparation at that time.

Influencing the 2010 Education Policy

The collaborative approach taken in communication and dissemination in partnership with other stakeholders such as the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) proved to be very useful in this effort. The Education Policy 2010 reflected policy priorities important for progress towards meaningful access in basic education for all with equity and quality. The priorities included free and compulsory primary education up to Grade 8; expansion of pre-primary education; multiple delivery modes in basic education with a common core curriculum and standards; student assessment to discourage rote learning; improvement of teachers' status, incentives and training to improve quality; improved governance and management; enhanced education resources; reform of madrasah education; and promoting inclusive education (Ministry of Education, 2010). These priorities, albeit noted in general terms in the education policy, reflected a broad common ground in the views expressed from the civil society. As discussed previously, these views were articulated in the CREATE research studies in Bangladesh.

Discourse on the Post-2015 Education Agenda

Education policy issues and concerns identified and analysed by CREATE research in Bangladesh and the conclusions from these remain pertinent as progress towards the 2015 education goals is assessed and the shortfalls are considered. National and international discussion on the global development agenda beyond 2015 and the related EFA agenda also calls for a critical look at achievements, constraints and a perspective of the future. The Bangladesh EFA 2015 review initiated under the UNESCO auspices has underscored the relevance of the research findings and analytical framework of CREATE applied in examining access, equity and transitions. Having examined progress and constraints related to the six EFA goals, the review (Ministry of Primary and Mass Education [MoPME], 2014) identified continuing issues in respect of:

1. Consensus-building on how the state's role and responsibility for fulfilling the right to basic education of citizens should be exercised
2. How to move the subsectors of primary and secondary education, which constitute the foundation of the national education system, away from a pattern of low investment and low performance
3. Deficiencies in developing and implementing workable strategies for literacy, lifelong learning and building skills and capabilities of people related to work, citizenship and personal fulfilment
4. Problems of effective governance and management in education—establishing ownership, continuity and consensus-building in policy, strategy and priority

In suggesting policy emphases to address the continuing concerns and the way forward, ten action priorities proposed parallel the conclusions and policy suggestions emanating from CREATE research as noted above. The action points relate to major concerns identified including the implications of household poverty, planning and management issues, pedagogy and classroom practices, attention to the urban poor, increasing educational funding, use of ICT and promoting the culture of timely school entry.

Considering educational responses to household poverty is clearly a priority since the socio-economic status of children is a major barrier to effective participation. Schools cannot deal with household poverty; however, schools have to be concerned with mitigating the constraints by their own effort to assist and support the disadvantaged learner.

As suggested, governance, including planning, and management of education to serve all children must be based on planning, implementation actions and monitoring progress for each administrative unit such as the sub-district and the village or town where the children are and where the services have to reach each child effectively. Urban slum dwellers who seem to fall between the administrative rut of the municipal and the sectoral authorities need special attention.

It is suggested that pedagogy, classroom practices and teacher awareness and attitudes have to be directed towards dealing with the neglected issue of children nomi-

nally in school but failing to be active in learning. Such aspects have to be understood better and addressed systematically. A threshold of resource availability has to be ensured commensurate with the objectives of quality and equity; otherwise the funds allocated are likely to be wasted when minimum acceptable results are not achieved.

A large gap between gross and net enrolment indicates high proportions of over-age and underage children in the schools. A culture of school entry with awareness about the right entry age and progression of children through the grades is associated with purposefulness, efficiency and quality in teaching-learning. Actors in local government, community and school have to support birth registration, in time enrolment drives and tracking of children's progress in the education system. Sharing and exchanging relevant experience should be promoted through regional and international cooperation. These initiatives would boost the national and regional EFA efforts (MoPME, 2014).

Conclusion

The CREATE research process and outputs have contributed to the discussion, clarification and formulation of policies, priorities and strategies in respect of participation in basic education with equity and quality. The research work and its outputs have laid the ground for continuing work on policy and strategy with enhanced conceptual clarity and stronger professional capacity. The findings and recommendations remain pertinent in the national discourse on the post-2015 education agenda. Indeed, the research output, as mentioned above, provided the content for the first comprehensive research-based book on pre-tertiary education in Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh CREATE Team engaged in wide-ranging communication and dissemination activities based on the overall CREATE communication and dissemination strategies. The communication activities were carried out as a collaborative effort with other key actors on the national scene, especially the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a forum of over 200 NGOs actively engaged in educational programmes and the host organisation for the annual research-based Education Watch reports (for Education Watch reports, see CAMPE Website www.campebd.org).

The communication activities were planned and implemented to adapt opportunistically to flows of information for different audiences at national and subnational levels. These included workshops and seminars, popular newspaper articles, electronic media presentations, journal articles as well as dissemination through CREATE monographs, policy briefs, a website and a book on Bangladesh education.

The communication activities were also designed to contribute to the ongoing education policy and planning discourse related to the political pledges of a new government elected in 2008, the preparation of a new education policy (approved by the Parliament in December 2010) and the formulation of the Sixth Five-Year National Development Plan (2011–2015). The research outputs also contributed to

the discussion related to the evaluation of PEDP II (2005–2010) and the preparation of PEDP III (2011–2015) (see DPE, 2011).

Participation in CREATE contributed to capacity building and professional development in several ways. Two staff members of BRACU-IED, the partner institution of CREATE Bangladesh, enrolled in the doctoral programme in education at the University of Sussex to explore different aspects of CREATE research in Bangladesh. The country analytical review and the ComSS research and field work involved hands-on experience and orientation of staff members of BRACU-IED, and the staff of five partner education-focussed NGOs were involved in ComSS design and implementation, along with some 100 young researchers and field investigators.

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